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ABSTRACT

Based on Maslow's characteristics of a "peak experience," 162 students in three introductory psychology classes and one personality class were asked to write a two-page paper describing a personal "peak experience." Papers were graded based on adherence to requirements, ability to apply Maslow's construct of the peak experience, and writing quality. After papers were graded, excerpts were read aloud with the exception of those requesting exemption from presentation (17 percent). Student questionnaires assessing the value of the assignment indicated the following: (1) 65 percent felt the assignment was "quite worthwhile," (2) 99 percent rated the assignment as either "quite interesting" or "somewhat interesting," (3) 93 percent agreed that the assignment was consistent with personal goals for the class, (4) 96 percent thought the assignment should be repeated the following semester, and (5) 95 percent felt the assignment facilitated their learning of Maslow's theories concerning peak experience. Further analysis of the papers indicated that most of the peak experiences had occurred during athletic, artistic, religious, or nature experiences, or during intimate moments with a friend or family member. Achievement of an important personal or collective goal or the overcoming of some adversity or danger represented other peak experiences. It is concluded that such an assignment encourages students to integrate affect and intellect, consistent with Carl Roger's views on the exploration of feelings as an integral part of academic learning. (LH)

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STUDENTS' PEAK EXPERIENCES: YES, PSYCHOLOGY
DEALS WITH HAPPINESS, TOO

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STUDENTS' PEAK EXPERIENCES: YES, PSYCHOLOGY
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ONE OF THE METHODS MASLOW (1962) USED TO UNDERSTAND WHAT HAPPENS DURING A PEAK EXPERIENCE WAS TO DEVELOP A COMPOSITE PICTURE BASED ON THE WRITTEN COMMENTS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS. THAT FACT RAISES THE POSSIBILITY OF HAVING UNDERGRADUATE PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS WRITE BRIEF ESSAYS ABOUT A PEAK EXPERIENCE THEY HAVE HAD IN ORDER TO HELP THEM UNDERSTAND MASLOW'S THEORY. IN THE EXERCISE DESCRIBED HERE, STUDENTS IN THREE INTRODUCTORY PSYCHOLOGY CLASSES AND ONE PERSONALITY CLASS WERE ASKED TO USE THEIR BEST LITERARY SKILLS TO DESCRIBE AS VIVIDLY AND ACCURATELY AS POSSIBLE WHERE THEY WERE AT THE TIME OF THE PEAK EXPERIENCE, WHAT THEY WERE DOING, HOW THEY FELT DURING AND AFTER THE EXPERIENCE, AND WHAT THE EXPERIENCE MEANT TO THEM THEN AND NOW.

METHOD

JUST AS MASLOW ASKED HIS PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS OVER TWENTY YEARS AGO, THE PRESENT STUDENTS WERE ASKED TO "THINK OF THE MOST WONDERFUL EXPERIENCE OF YOUR LIFE; THE HAPPIEST MOMENTS, ECSTATIC MOMENTS, MOMENTS OF RAPTURE, PERHAPS FROM BEING IN LOVE, OR FROM LISTENING TO MUSIC OR SUDDENLY 'BEING HIT' BY A BOOK OR PAINTING, OR FROM SOME CREATIVE MOMENT" (1962, P. 67). STUDENTS WERE REFERRED TO MASLOW'S CHARACTERISTICS OF A PEAK

EXPERIENCE WHICH HAD BEEN COVERED IN LECTURE BUT WERE REMINDED THAT ONE PEAK EXPERIENCE IS NOT LIKELY TO INVOLVE ALL THE PHYSICAL, COGNITIVE, AND EMOTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF MASLOW'S "COMPOSITE" (PP. 67-108).

THE MAXIMUM LENGTH OF THE PAPER WAS TWO TYPED PAGES. THREE GRADING CRITERIA WERE ANNOUNCED:

1. ADHERENCE TO REQUIREMENTS
2. DEMONSTRATED ABILITY TO APPLY MASLOW'S CONSTRUCT OF THE PEAK EXPERIENCE
3. QUALITY OF THE WRITING (E.G., WORD SELECTION, CLARITY, SENTENCE AND PARAGRAPH STRUCTURE, EFFECTIVENESS OF OPENING AND CLOSING SENTENCES, GRAMMAR, SPELLING, ETC.)

STUDENTS WERE TOLD THAT THE BRIEF LENGTH WOULD ALLOW THEM TO CONCENTRATE ON THE QUALITY OF THEIR WRITING. THEY WERE ALSO INFORMED THAT AFTER THE PAPERS WERE GRADED I WOULD READ ALOUD SOME EXERPTS FROM THE BEST PAPERS, UNLESS THE STUDENT REQUESTED I NOT DO SO. PERHAPS DUE TO THE PERSONAL NATURE OF THE EXERCISE, 28 OF THE 162 PARTICIPANTS (17%) REQUESTED THAT THEIR PAPERS BE EXEMPTED FROM PRESENTATION. STUDENTS WERE ALSO GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO NEGOTIATE AN ALTERNATE ASSIGNMENT OF SIMILAR LENGTH AND DIFFICULTY BUT NO ONE PURSUED THAT OPTION.

AT THE END OF THE SEMESTER, STUDENTS COMPLETED AN ANONYMOUS QUESTIONNAIRE ASSESSING WHETHER THE ASSIGNMENT HAD BEEN A WORTHWHILE LEARNING EXPERIENCE CONSISTENT WITH

THEIR PERSONAL GOALS FOR THE COURSE. AN OPEN-ENDED ITEM INQUIRED ABOUT ANY ASPECT(S) OF THE ASSIGNMENT THE STUDENT LIKED AND/OR DISLIKED MOST.

RESULTS

STUDENT EVALUATIONS CORROBORATED MY SUBJECTIVE IMPRESSION THAT THIS WAS A VERY SUCCESSFUL ACTIVITY. WHEN ASKED "HOW WORTHWHILE WAS THIS ASSIGNMENT?", 65% MARKED "QUITE WORTHWHILE," AND 33% MARKED "SOMEWHAT WORTHWHILE." ONLY 2% INDICATED THAT THE ASSIGNMENT WAS "NOT VERY WORTHWHILE" AND NO ONE CHECKED "TOTALLY WORTHLESS."

THE PARTICIPANTS WERE ALSO NEARLY UNANIMOUS IN THEIR APPROVAL RATINGS ON THE ITEM "HOW INTERESTING WAS THE ASSIGNMENT?" RESULTS SHOW THAT 74% FOUND IT "QUITE INTERESTING" AND 25% FOUND IT "SOMEWHAT INTERESTING." ONLY 1% (2 STUDENTS) REPORTED THAT THE EXERCISE WAS "NOT VERY INTERESTING" AND NO ONE INDICATED THAT IT WAS "DOWNRIGHT DULL." IN ADDITION, A VAST MAJORITY (93%) OF THE STUDENTS RESPONDED "YES" TO THE ITEM "WAS THIS ASSIGNMENT CONSISTENT WITH YOUR PERSONAL GOALS FOR THE COURSE?" AND 96% MARKED "YES" TO THE QUESTION "SHOULD THIS ASSIGNMENT BE REPEATED NEXT SEMESTER?" PERHAPS THE KEY ITEM ON THE QUESTIONNAIRE FROM AN INSTRUCTIONAL STANDPOINT WAS "DID THIS ASSIGNMENT FACILITATE YOUR LEARNING OF MASLOW'S THEORIES CONCERNING PEAK EXPERIENCES?" AGAIN, 95% RESPONDED "YES," WITH 2% "NO,"

AND 3% "DON'T KNOW." REACTIONS WERE EQUALLY FAVORABLE IN BOTH COURSES.

DISCUSSION

I WAS VERY IMPRESSED BY THE THOUGHTFULNESS AND ENTHUSIASM STUDENTS SHOWED DURING THIS ASSIGNMENT. EVERY STUDENT WAS ABLE TO WRITE ABOUT A PEAK EXPERIENCE WHICH DEMONSTRATED SOME OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MASLOW'S CONSTRUCT -- THE INTRINSICALLY GOOD FEELINGS, THE TOTAL ATTENTIVENESS IN THE HERE-AND-NOW, THE EFFORTLESS FUNCTIONING, THE SPONTANEITY AND HARMONY WITH THE ENVIRONMENT, AND/OR THE FREEDOM FROM BLOCKS, FEARS, AND DOUBTS. MOST OF THE PEAK EXPERIENCES HAD OCCURRED DURING ATHLETIC, ARTISTIC, RELIGIOUS, OR NATURE EXPERIENCES, OR DURING INTIMATE MOMENTS WITH A FRIEND OR FAMILY MEMBER. THERE WERE A NUMBER OF PEAK EXPERIENCES IN WHICH THE STUDENT ACHIEVED AN IMPORTANT PERSONAL OR COLLECTIVE GOAL. THERE WERE ALSO PEAK EXPERIENCES IN WHICH THE STUDENT OVERCAME SOME ADVERSITY OR DANGER OR HELPED SOMEONE IN NEED.

IN SHORT, THESE ESSAYS REPRESENT A CORNUCOPIA OF HAPPY, FULFILLING EXPERIENCES. IN FACT, THAT IS A PRIMARY REASON FOR THE SUCCESS OF THE EXERCISE, ACCORDING TO STUDENTS' COMMENTS. THEY ENJOYED REMINISCING ABOUT A JOYFUL EVENT AND THEY ENJOYED LEARNING ABOUT THE HAPPY EXPERIENCES OF OTHERS. MANY STUDENTS ALSO LIKED THE FACT

THAT THE EXERCISE INVOLVED CREATIVE EXPRESSION IN CONJUNCTION WITH SCIENTIFIC THEORY AND THEY LIKED THE OPPORTUNITY TO APPLY WHAT THEY HAD LEARNED IN THE CLASSROOM. SEVERAL STUDENTS REMARKED THAT THIS WAS THE FIRST TIME THEY HAD ACTUALLY LOOKED FORWARD TO WRITING A PAPER IN COLLEGE.

BASED ON THE COMMENTS, THERE ARE A FEW POTENTIAL PROBLEMS WITH THIS ASSIGNMENT. A FEW STUDENTS FOUND IT EMBARRASSING TO HEAR FEELINGS BEING DISCUSSED IN THE CLASSROOM AND THERE WERE A FEW SUGGESTIONS THAT THE WRITER'S NAME SHOULD NOT BE MENTIONED DURING THE PRESENTATION. THESE CONCERNS EMPHASIZE THE NEED FOR SENSITIVITY AND RESPECTFULNESS WHEN DISCUSSING STUDENTS' PEAK EXPERIENCES. NOT GIVING THE NAMES IS A REASONABLE OPTION; HOWEVER, IT MIGHT DETRACT FROM THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE IF THE AUTHOR OF A PAPER WERE UNABLE TO ANSWER QUESTIONS OR DISCUSS THE EXPERIENCE FROM HIS OR HER UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE. FURTHERMORE, IDENTIFYING THE AUTHORS SEEMS CONSISTENT WITH THE PRINCIPLE OF TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR ONE'S VIEWS AND FEELINGS. THE OPTION OF NOT HAVING ONE'S PAPER PRESENTED IN CLASS IS A SUFFICIENT PRECAUTION IN MY OPINION.

THERE WERE A FEW STUDENTS WHO DID NOT LIKE BEING GRADED ON THIS PAPER EVEN THOUGH I EMPHASIZED THAT IT WAS THE PAPER AND NOT THE PEAK EXPERIENCE THAT WAS BEING GRADED

(BY DEFINITION THE LATTER WOULD RECEIVE AN A+). AND THERE WERE SOME COMPLAINTS ABOUT MY EMPHASIS ON WRITING AS A GRADING CRITERION. I FEEL THAT THE EMPHASIS ON WRITING QUALITY IS AN IMPORTANT COMPONENT OF THIS EXERCISE. I AM COMFORTABLE GRADING AND PROVIDING FEEDBACK ON STUDENTS' WRITTEN COMMUNICATION AND IT APPEARS THAT A GROWING NUMBER OF PSYCHOLOGY TEACHERS FEEL LIKEWISE (CALHOUN & SELBY, 1979; KLUGH, 1983; SPIEGEL, CAMERON, EVANS, & NODINE, 1980).

AS WITH ANY GOOD EDUCATIONAL EXERCISE, THERE WERE SOME STUDENTS WHO FOUND THIS ONE DIFFICULT. APPARENTLY THERE WAS LITTLE DIFFICULTY IN CHOOSING A PEAK EXPERIENCE BUT, AS SEVERAL STUDENTS NOTED, IT WAS HARD TO WRITE ABOUT FEELINGS. IN FACT, THAT IS THE THING I LIKED BEST ABOUT THE ASSIGNMENT: IT ENCOURAGED STUDENTS TO INTEGRATE AFFECT AND INTELLECT, CONSISTENT WITH CARL ROGERS' VIEWS ON THE EXPLORATION OF FEELINGS AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF ACADEMIC LEARNING (ROGERS, 1969). THE QUESTIONNAIRE DATA INDICATE THAT WRITING ABOUT AN IMPORTANT PERSONAL EXPERIENCE IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND A MAJOR PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY WAS A WORTHWHILE LEARNING EXPERIENCE. THAT IS CONSISTENT WITH THE FINDING BY McKEACHIE, LIN, MOFFETT, AND DAUGHERTY (1978) THAT TEACHING IS MORE EFFECTIVE WHEN IT ALLOWS STUDENTS TO EXPRESS THEIR OWN VIEWS AND INTERESTS.

ANOTHER THING I LIKED ABOUT THIS EXERCISE IS THAT IT ENHANCED MY OWN UNDERSTANDING OF PEAK EXPERIENCES. I BECAME

AWARE OF HOW IMPORTANT THESE EVENTS ARE IN THE LIVES OF MY STUDENTS AND I BEGAN TO APPRECIATE JUST HOW INTERESTING AND RICH THIS CONSTRUCT IS. I BECAME MOTIVATED TO LEARN ABOUT RECENT EMPIRICAL RESEARCH AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS INVOLVING PEAK EXPERIENCES. ESPECIALLY IN THE GROWING FIELD OF SPORT PSYCHOLOGY (E.G., RAVIZZA, 1977; R. J. ROTELLA, PERSONAL COMMUNICATION, FEBRUARY 21, 1984). AND FINALLY, I DISCOVERED IN MORE THAN AN INTELLECTUAL SENSE THAT THE PEAK EXPERIENCE IS TRULY ONE OF THE MOST OPTIMISTIC THEORIES IN A FIELD OFTEN ASSOCIATED WITH PSYCHOPATHOLOGY AND HUMAN PROBLEMS. IT WAS VERY GRATIFYING TO TEACH STUDENTS THAT PSYCHOLOGY DEALS WITH HAPPINESS, TOO.

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